

Striking campus

The novelist *Tom Sharpe* finds inspiration and irritation in Cambridge, a "perfect theatrical backdrop"; photograph *David Reed*

A novelist is never where he is. He is always somewhere else, only half there; and a comic novelist is hardly there at all. He is pottering around with pigs or one-legged schoolmasters or men in boats.

Sidele up to a novelist and say, "Excuse me, but is this your home town?" and he is likely to blanch and mutter something about home being where the heart is. Considering how heartless comic novelists usually are, this isn't particularly helpful. Sidele up to anyone in Cambridge and ask the same question and almost certainly you will get the same sort of evasive reply. Which is why I have every right to call 'Cambridge my home town.

In fact I was born in Holloway (which always seems to interest Customs Officials when they examine my passport) and spent the first seven years of my life in Croydon. Then came the war and we were here there and everywhere thanks to my father who, being a moral and intellectual contortionist, managed to combine remaining a Unitarian Minister with what in retrospect I can see to have been a somewhat uncritical admiration for Mr Hitler. If we hadn't been one jump ahead of the police he might have spent the duration interned under the 18B regulations.

After two years in the Marines I came to Cambridge as an undergraduate. From that moment Cambridge became my home town. Take me to the other side of the globe and like some demented homing pigeon I will make tracks for Cambridge.

It has everything I want: splendid architecture, delightful college gardens, the Backs, King's College Chapel, Market Hill and more obvious scholarly eccentrics than any other town on earth. All in all, Cambridge is a perfect theatrical backdrop against which to posture as an undergraduate, to parade as a don and to be invisible as a novelist.

Every day I cycle from home to my hut where I work on the other



Tom Sharpe commuting to the garden hut he works in; Dandy, his dog, goes along for the exercise

side of town. It has a dual purpose, that hut in the garden in Newnham. It gets me away from the noise of children and it means I have to cycle six miles there and back. I get some exercise and so does Dandy, my Border terrier, who rides in the basket and runs across Midsummer Common, Jesus Green, Laundress Green and Lammas Land.

Each day, as I go down Trinity Street and King's Parade, I have only to look around me to see fellow explorers 'somewhere else'. There they go shambling along the pavement with the look of Koestler's Sleepwalkers muttering to themselves about an ecclesiastical controversy in the 17th century or low temperature physics in the 21st.

The tobacconist from whom I buy my quarter pound tins of snuff is a positive paragon of disregard and excellent service, a combination that defeats the egregious foreigner who expects to be charmed into buying a pipe. Well, if he wants a pipe he'll get one, a good one at a very reasonable price. If he wants charm let him go elsewhere.

Then there's my typewriter suppliers, the Germanys. I am obsessive about typewriters and hardly a month goes by without a change. And so when they see me coming the Germanys smile, as well they may. It is the smile of the fisherman when he sees the fish rising. But

there is another side to it, and old Mr Germany, who cut his teeth on Underwoods 50 years ago, shares my regard for the perfect typewriter. There isn't such a thing and we both know it. Still we stand and stare across at the Fitzwilliam Museum and talk about my ancient Hammond Folding Multiplex and the great days of the Woodstock. We are both somewhere else.

And so is Fred, who works in the hut opposite mine on something called Inferential Semantics. He reads seven languages and has spent a life time involved with the attractions, edible and otherwise, of fungi. Fred is my dictionary. I go across the garden to find out what reticulum means and learn that it is not as I had supposed a lady's handbag but a ruminant's second stomach. That is one of the great attractions of Cambridge. There is always someone at hand who knows all that there is to be known about something or other.

And if that were all it would be enough; but there is another side of Cambridge, a secret hostile side that preys upon the foreigner and the stranger, those hordes of invaders who sweep down on the town and litter the Backs. I find this hostility most reassuring. It speaks to me of old England, an England more ancient than the oldest college, Peterhouse. The icy wind that blows unhindered from the Urals to

the Gogs is a zephyr by comparison with the icy blasts that issue from the porters' lodge.

Smile and the world smiles with you may work in London or Leeds. Smile in Cambridge and see where it gets you. But that's because for half the year we live in an occupied country and there is resistance to be organised, an enemy to be deceived and a smiler is breaking ranks.

Not that people don't smile in Cambridge but purposefully in sycophancy and secretly in revenge. Once in the good old days when a week without a suicide was rare - before they installed natural gas - I caught the sound at midnight of a College Chaplain chuckling. Another intruder had bitten the dust.

In fact the Chaplain was premature. That luckless fellow hadn't put enough shillings in his landlady's doctored meter. They sent him down, of course, on the self-evident grounds that a man who couldn't take his own life was unfit to take a degree.

Cambridge has always been about invasions, waves of invaders and tides of foreigners who roll over the town and ebb leaving deposited in bedsitters and college rooms a jetsam for whom Cambridge becomes home. They have survived the experience of the town.

NEXT WEEK

Ray Connolly on Ormskirk